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AUTHOR Christensen, Torkil
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ABSTRACT

An experimental one-year course in English for freshman nonmajors at a Japanese university is described and discussed. Classes, comprised of over 50 students, met once a week for 90-minute lessons. The syllabus focused on the thorough learning of short, humorous stories and activities developed from the stories. In class, English was used as much as possible in writing and speaking. Teaching large classes of non-English majors was possible, but the initial goal of enabling the students to tell the stories freely in English was not achieved. The greatest difficulty was found to be getting the students to relate the text's ordinary English to ordinary Japanese, perhaps due to word to word rephrasings used in previous language training. Suggested improvements include additional language-intensive activities, less reliance on the text and more reliance on student notebooks, and more study of practical language-use situations. (MSE)

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Torkil Christensen

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Teaching English to non-English majors at Sapporo University, 1983-84.

Torkil Christensen

Abstract

This paper details a one year course in English for freshmen non-English majors at Sapporo University. A class consisted of over fifty students, and met once a week for a ninety minute lesson, from April 1983 till the last lesson in January 1984.

The study was centered around short humorous stories, which were assigned for thorough learning, and various activities developed from the stories. The paper first discusses the plans for and conditions under which the course was conducted and then details the procedures followed in the lessons. The grading and the language used in class is also discussed. To place the course in an English language teaching context, a rationale for the design and procedures is detailed. The conclusions and recommendations suggest that the format is advantageous with a class of this kind and that more supplementary activities be developed to increase the variety and utility of the course.

Introduction

This is a report of the writers experience teaching English to first year students for the Faculty of General Education at Sapporo University from April 1983 to March 1984. The students were two classes enrolled with the management department. It was the first time for the writer to teach English to freshman non-English majors and there were some initial worries about the student reactions. These however proved unfounded and after the first few classes there were few problems.

The students quickly caught on to what was expected of them and they generally studied and performed the activities as they were requested. The format planned for the lessons was kept throughout the year and proved sufficiently fiexible to permit a variety of activities. The final grades at the end of the year were based on grades earned in tests at the end of the first term and at the end of the second. These tests closely mirrored the material that was taught in class, and very few students performed poorly on the tests. Some students did however require assistance in understanding the meaning of some of the test questions, which were all in English.

The study may be considered successful in that the students were all able to follow the classes till the end of the year. Even with a small number of absences it was possible to make up for lost time and catch up with the study. The goal, to have the students tell stories studied in class in English was not achieved, however the students were able to understand the stories, and helped by the printed and written texts had little trouble retelling the stories, which they seemed to find interesting.

The activities additional to the stories were very limited and it will be possible to expand these as experience accumulates, however the size of the classes exclude many communication centered activities that are generally considered suitable for large classes. It is recommended that the stories remain central in this kind of class, and that the basic format be kept. Additional activities should have some relation to the material in the stories as well as they should have utility for the students.

The Plan and Conditions for the Course

A text by L. A. Hill: *Intermediate Stories for Reproduction, American Series*, Oxford University Press, 1980, was selected for the course. The text contains thirty humorous stories each of about 150 words with a vocabulary limited to a wordlist of 1,500 words developed by the author and provided in the back of the book. Together with the stories the text contains a number of different exercises based on the material in the stories.

In one lesson the study consisted of reading and learning one of the stories in the text, copying a shortened version of this story from the blackboard, and practicing to read and translate it. In addition to studying the story we studied one or two of the exercises in the text and conducted some activity which took its starting point in the story just studied, simple and controlled activities early in the year and more complex and less controlled ones later.

The goal of the study was to enable the students to retell the stories in English, and through the activities to acquaint them with English as a useful and not impossible medium that will be effective when its use is attempted. The goal was not completely reached, but the students were able to retell the stories in Japanese, and supported by the text this was also possible in English.

The text was selected as the stories are short, humorous, and utilize a limited vocabulary, and as they and the exercises can be used with the large classes taught in this course. Enrollment was about sixty students per class with over fifty attending a lesson. The classroom had two side aisles and a

center aisle with the students sitting five abreast on both sides of the center aisle. The classrooms faced south making the writing on the blackboard difficult to see for about half the students. This is due to reflection of light from outdoors, and by lowering the blinds the problem was eliminated.

The high number of students results in limited personal attention and makes it difficult to learn all names in a reasonable time. To overcome these handicaps it was considered important to provide both a variety of tasks that could be performed immediately by every student and to provide tasks that would have relevance to the concerns and needs of the students.

The class met once a week, the lessons started in early April 1983 and the final lesson was about nine months later in January 1984. During the year there is a long summer holiday dividing the year into two semesters and in some weeks there are no classes due to national or other holidays.

The plans considered the students' level of English and their abilities in English, to evaluate how it would be possible to utilize this ability. The level of the ability was estimated to be higher than the students themselves realize and the ability to be mainly in silent reading and writing and word to word translation of English sentences into Japanese and vice versa.

It was thought that by a gradation of the material it would be possible to familiarize the students with English as a medium for communication and problem solving. It was further expected that the students would be reluctant to study complex and abstract material, but that they would be ready to attempt the study if the requirements did not appear insurmountable. It was also expected that they would be able to do far more

than they imagined with the English they knew and acquired. It was hoped that by the end of the year they would know how English can be used and that given opportunities they would be able to display this knowledge.

Procedures

One ninety minute lesson was divided into two parts. First the study of the story in the textbook and the first exercise after the story, this usually took 40-50 minutes, and then the remaining time was used for one or more other activities.

Before studying the week's story, we reviewed (recalled) the stories already studied before going on to the new story. Generally only the stories studied in the semester in progress were reviewed in this manner, so that the stories learned in the first semester were not brought up in the second. The students were permitted to read these old stories from their notebooks, the original plan was to have the students memorize the stories but that proved impossible. The students were nominated to read one by one, and choral reading was not attempted.

The new story was read sentence by sentence by the students. When parts seemed difficult to comprehend or where there was a suspicion that a word or phrase was not fully understood this was translated into Japanese by other students. When pronunciation or intonation deviated extremely from ordinary English, the offending words were repeated (drilled) till it could be assumed that everybody had heard and knew the acceptable forms. As the reading progressed, a shortened version of the story was written on the blackboard for copying

into the students' notebooks. This shortened version was assigned for more thorough learning, and in class it was read 10-15 times by different students. The readings in English were interspaced with translations into Japanese, as often as it was deemed necessary to ensure that the story and the point of the story were understood by all the students. During this reading a name was assigned to the story and from then on the story was known under that name.

This is the first story in the original:

Jim walked into a store which had a sign outside : "Second-hand clothes bought and sold." He was carrying an old pair of pants and asked the owner of the store, "How much will you give me for these?" The man looked at them and then said rudely, "Two dollars."

"What!" said Jim. "I had guessed they were worth at least five."

"No," said the man, "they aren't worth a penny more than two dollars."

"Are you sure?" asked jim.

"Very sure," said the man.

"Well," said Jim, taking two dollars out of his pocket, "here's your money. These pants were hanging outside your store with a price tag that said $6.50, but I thought that was too much money, so I wanted to make sure how much they were really worth."

Then he walked out of the store with the pair of pants and disappeared before the surprised store owner could think of anything to say.

The shortened version was like this:

We are in a second-hand clothes store. Jim is carrying an old pair of trousers.

Jim : How much are these trousers?

Man : $2.

Jim : Oh, I thought at least $5.

Man : No, they are $2.

Jim : Really?

Man : Yes.
Jim : Here is $2,
and Jim runs out of the store.

This story was called the "Second-Hand Clothes Story" and was taught in the first lesson of the first semester. The shortened version was written on the blackboard writhout a prepared draft, and the above version and those presented to the two classes are slightly different. In this and some of the other stories I included words not in the original, but which are commonly used or are words with pronunciations that would challenge the students (words like: trousers, shopassistant, and neighbor) The story line was usually kept but details were altered to suit the shorter format.

Some students are late, and during the first part of the lesson they will be arriving in ones and twos and the attention of the whole class is easily deflected from the study. Generally such upsets were avoided by ensuring that from the start of the study someone was at all times speaking English, or Japanese when that had been requested. Some students have low voices that are difficult to catch even a short distance away. These students were not forced to speak in a higher voice, instead I repeated such very quiet responses or parts of the responses, to ensure that the whole class had an opportunity to hear them. When the students were copying from the blackboard I was walking around the classroom, saying what they were writing just then, and repeating it as often as time permitted. Some students have great trouble copying from the blackboard and I helped them.

When the story had been adequately learned, the next point

was the first exercise following this story in the textbook. This first exercise consists of six comprehension questions and one student read a question (often two or three times) while another was asked to answer. Early in the year it appeared difficult for the students to comprehend longer questions, and I occasionally shortened and rephrased questions or divided one long question into several shorter ones, as it seemed appropriate. When it is necessary to rephrase the text of the story in the answers, the students also have trouble answering. I tried to tailor questions so that this was not necessary early in the year, and only later asked for longer and more complex answers.

During the second half of the lesson we studied the two remaining exercises that accompany the story or did exercises that were somehow related to the story just studied.

In the first lesson the activities were the second exercise following the story and a recalculation of the prices in that particular story into yen and a determination of the prices of the students' clothes in US dollars.

The exercise involves finding words from the story that mean the opposite of a series of six words. It was a difficult exercise and the word "opposite" caused some confusion. I consider that the element that troubled the students most was the total absence of Japanese. The exercise was entirely in English, without a Japanese rephrasing to support comprehension. Such exercises, requests for opposite or similar words, appear regularly in this textbook, and it took some time before the students became at ease with this kind of question.

For the calculations into US dollars and yen, I provided an exchange rate on the blackboard and the exercise required that

the students write the name of clothing items and their prices. It took some time before all managed this, and there was enough time to ask nearly everybody to read at least one of their items to the class. Before the end of the lesson I requested that they write three clothes items with prices in yen and US dollars on the back of the name slips to be handed in to me. This again caused consternation, but all handed in the little piece of paper. During all this I was walking around asking students to say what they were writing.

I did a similar exercise in the last lesson before the final test, and it went smoothly without any confusion. This time the students were asked to write a menu for a coffeeshop, with half a dozen foods and beverages and their prices (the story was in a coffeeshop).

From the first lesson I made effort to use the students'names when asking them to read or say something. The attendance slips provided by the university are very suitable for this, and I requested that this slip be put on the desk so that I could read the names easily. In the initial lessons, before a roll of student names was available, I collected the slips at the end of a lesson. Later, after a student roll had become available I asked the students to keep the slip, and during the lesson put it on the desk, when a slip was lost, I provided a replacement.

In the following lessons we advanced one story a lesson and did other exercises and activities. We tried long numbers (up to 10^{12}), family relations, addresses and telephone numbers, counting things, bank accounts and account numbers, and other matters that I considered to be somehow related to a story and also relevant for the students. Relevancy and utility were also

determined on the basis of whether an activity could be individualized, written own, and used for presentation to the class.

Towards the end of the first semester we started writing "original" sentences. I specified a model, for example:

I *word word* in / on *word word* .,

and requested a fairly large number of sentences of this pattern to be completed in class. Intially the large number of sentences to be written upset the students, but as they realized that they were able to accomplish it they seemed to enjoy this kind of exercise. While they were writing these sentences I requested them to read their productions loud or I read their finished products for everyone to hear, at the same time I moved around the classroom and corrected faulty spelling and grammar.

About three times in a semester I requested the sentences and other exercises written for the activities to be handed in. Further, I used the back of the attendance slips for writing exercises to be handed in. The assignments to be handed in were such that it was generally possible to complete them during class. After looking through the contributions, I handed them back in the following lesson. The students who were not ready to hand in at the end of a lesson or were absent, were requested to hand in the exercise the following week, and they generally did so.

Grading and Language

Grades were handed in to the university at the end of the year and they consisted of the scores of a test at the end of the first semester and one at the end of the year. The tests contained a story similar to the ones that had been studied in class,

with questions like those in the textbook-exercises plus a request for translation of parts of the test story into Japanese. Further the students were requested to write one of the stories we had studied in the particular semester, which story was to be written was explained on the blackboard so it was not possible to know it in advance. The third part of the test was, for the first test, to copy a memorized story the students themselves selected from among those that had been studied, and in the second test it was to write things that the student would say to or tell the persons in that particular story if the student were to meet the people. There were also other questions reflecting the activities that had taken place during the semester.

The results of the tests were good, with only very few students scoring below the failing grade. Some students had trouble with the absence of Japanese in the tests and I provided help in explaining the meaning of some of the questions, as well as I was available to give the spelling of words that they found difficult. The students were allowed to use dictionairies but not all utilized that.

As a result it may be said that the students learned the material we had been studying and became able to tell (write) the studied stories in English. For the third part of the year end test, where they were addressing the persons in the test-story, they showed great ingeniuity in the contributions. They would probably not be able to say all they wrote, unprompted by a written sample, but they showed good understanding of what can be said to fellow humans in English.

The translations into Japanese must be considered less successful. The students generally provided word by word

rephrasings that were not really Japanese (For example "my father" becomes "watashi no otosan / chichi"). Early in the year it was nearly impossible to get the translations to be usual Japanese but in the second semester usual Japanese had become the rule in class. Still, at the test the Japanese was much less natural, possibly due to nervousness at the test or a feeling that I really did not want ordinary Japanese in the written answers.

The problem seems to be that the students in high scool have learned to provide word by word rephrasings and come to look upon that as a translation (or "meaning" as they often express it). Throughout the year I placed some stress on seeing that translations into Japanese used ordinary Japanese, with the uncertain results reported here. The poor results may be attributed to the limited impact of a single class. A disincentive to abandoning this practice is that it may be detrimental to the grades in other English cources. It is however my feeling that word by word rephrasings must be abandoned before any fluency in English becomes possible, and as a result this becomes a matter of central importance in English teaching and learning.

During the lessons I tried to use English at all times, as well as I saw that Japanese was only used when translating or when there seemed no other choice. Early in the year and especially in the first few lessons a lot of the instructions were in Japanese, as they would probably not otherwise be understood. However, as the weeks went by and the students got used to the format of the lessons, they were treated to less and less Japanese and towards the end of the year, the ideal, English

only, policy was very nearly achieved. One reason why it was possible to conduct the classes in English was undoubtedly that the students were guessing what I said or relied on their neighbors. However as I repeated directions and other messages liberally and varied the expressions it was not always possible to avoid having to listen and understand, and I feel that there was a noticeable improvement in the ability to comprehend spoken English.

Much of the time the English in class was English produced by the students themselves, in retelling (reading) the stories or reporting their responses to assignments. As Japanese generally consider their pronunciation of English to be poor this raises the problem of whether this English is delivered with an acceptable pronunciation. Generally I would claim the students' pronunciation to be acceptable. Early in the year there is some hesitation with speaking up and this does affect the delivery, but such hesitation disappears and generally the students display good pronunciations and intonations. Some do not pronounce English very well however, and the lines in the stories occasionally demand exact intonations and pauses that are difficult for the students to know and reproduce.

The students who have poor pronunciation need some attention. I tried to remember who had poor pronunciations and to assign these students things to say that did not contain long or unusual words. After these students have heard classmates produce well sounding English they appeared to make an effort to catch up. A few students displayed speech impediments when faced with English but when the English to be said is not unduly complicated, and the instructor sees to avoid situa-

tions where these students get laughed at by their classmates, they were willing to try, and the students in the two classes here developed a good delivery and pronunciation.

Saying lines that require set intonations and pauses in the delivery are difficult for all the students, and when they occur they are suitable for pronunciation practice. A group of words that offer themselves for pronunciation practice is the numerous English words that are used in Japanese. These words generally undergo some change from the original English, and the English pronunciation and spelling become exceedingly difficult to achieve for the students. These words provide good opportunities to practice the English way of saying things, with all students at an equal disadvantage.

A Rationale for the Approach

The approach used in the course was based on my anticipation of the English skills the students had, the limitations imposed by the physical environment in the classroom, and an assessment of what would constitute a meaningful English study.

Before entering Sapporo University the students have been subjected to three years of English in junior high school and a further three years in senior high school. They are acquainted with printed English and they have studied translating to and from English and also intonation and pronunciation. The main deficiencies in the English ability is a poor comprehension of spoken English, a limited active vocabulary, and difficulties in comprehending longer passages. They also have great trouble speaking (expressing) English without a written model, and the grammar and spelling is generally not good when the students

write English.

These strengths and weaknesses where the main factors determining the plans for the study, however further elements, related to the furnishings and the equipment in the classroom, were considered in selecting the procedures in class. The seating arrangement with the students sitting in rows of five influences the class enviroment strongly, and the size of the blackboard is another element, as it determines the length of the shortened story which can written without erasing; the number of students, fifty in a usual lesson, is also a factor to include in considering how to approach the study.

The utility of the study, as perceived by the students, is a critical element. The need for using English in Sapporo is small, and the difficulty the students perceive with using English makes it seem advantageous to avoid it. If the material covered in class can show that everyday activities and matters can be expressed in English and that this is simple and occasionally convenient, the students may get to view English as a skill that can and ought to be mastered.

With a non-Japanese teacher the students will feel uncomfortable and the perceived "unnaturalness" may not go away during the year. At the end of the year they may count it as a major achievement that they got though the year with a passing grade and some comprehension of the material.

The numerous conditions elaborated here delimit the possibilities for the study and enables a selection of methods and procedures that fit the situation. The delimitations may seem to limit the study severely, however I would claim them to be a help that makes it possible to avoid what would prove ineffec-

tual. The moderate success of the approach supports this view.

The literature on language instruction contains numerous suggestions for how to deal with large classes. In the last few years these ideas have been concentrated on how to give students chances to speak and communicate, by dividing classes into smaller groups and even pairs. Some years ago it was choral reading, mim-mem, that was poular among textbook publishers.

Both approaches were found unsuitable for the present situation. The group work would not be successful as the students could not move their chairs and would initially not be ready to talk to each other. With a single meeting a week for a maximum of thirty weeks, the effect would be limited and possibly very poor for a large part of the less motivated students. Mim-mem materials have in recent years become very scarce, partly it may be supposed, because they are not seen to work very well. It may however be worth considering some choral reading with this large class, students with small voices may find support and comfort in such an activity.

Some teaching methods that have appeared in the last decade consider a silent period, a period where the student is listening and learning but not responding verbally. This is the case in the Total Physical Response method. Others like the Silent Way advocate speaking from the start with the teacher silent. Both seem impractical with fifty students, where the classroom cannot be quiet and fully attentive at all times, and where the room is large and the distance from the back of the room to the blackboard is considerable.

I expected that to keep the students attention it was neces-

sary that they have something to do (write) in addition to the occasional chance to say something; and that some would be reluctant to engage in extensive homework, while others would be eager to study and prepare for the lessons.

The approach detailed here was selected with the abovementioned constraints in mind. In the classroom, English would be heard most of the time, generally the students reading from text and notebooks, or the teacher (me) reading or giving instructions. When Japanese was used (in translations) it was to enable comprehension of the English either in the textbook or notebooks. The material thus presented to the class was English that the students themselves had written in their notebooks and English that was often individualized to the unique situations or wishes of the students. The printed text was a basis for the study making preparation before class advantageous.

The conditions for success with this approach are that the students are kept talking, saying things in English and writing (creating) the things to be said. This requires that the tasks must be feasible (not too difficult to execute) and that the teacher is ready to nominate a new person when one has finished a contribution. The result is a brisk tempo and a good deal of running around in the classroom, at least before the names have been learned.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it was possible for a non-Japanese to conduct English lessons with very large classes of students who were not majoring in English. It was done without relying on gram-

mar and translation as the main tools of the study, and the students were able to follow the lessons thoughout the year despite the very limited amount of Japanese used in class and the total absence of Japanese in the textbook.

The initial goal of getting the students to become able to tell the studied stories freely in English was not achieved, and it may be considered to have been overambitious, or it was perhaps because of the little need there is for telling funny stories in English in the students' daily lives.

At the end of the year the students apparently had an understanding of what can be addressed to people in specific situations, and if necessary they would undoubtedly be able to verbalize some of this. They were further able to hand in acceptable answers to tests using English only, as well as they had acquired a stock of stories that they could relate in Japanese.

The greatest difficulty I felt was to get the students to relate the very ordinary English in the textbook in ordinary Japanese. As mentioned above I consider this skill essential to achieve a good abillity in English, but due to the extensive training in word to word rephrasings that takes place in the students' other English study the chances of resolving this problem remain poor.

To improve the approach reported here I would consider expanding the number of activities additional to the stories and perhaps through such expansion become more dependent on the student manufactured note books, and less on the printed text. The constraints caused by the characteristics of the class mean that the method of introduction and the practical arrangements

for the activities must be thought out in detail to ensure that everybody is kept busy with English as far as is at all possible. If the attention of the class is lost it is difficult to recover it in that lesson.

Possible activities to consider are directions for getting somewhere, ways of getting there, and the positions of objects in space and on sketches. These are only suggestions and it will be possible for a teacher faced with this kind of class to develop his/her own repertoire, one that fits a particular class as well as instructor. The guiding principle must be the utility to the students in the situations where they may be faced with English.

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